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Computer Assisted Language Learning Freedom or Submission to Machines?

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Abstract

CALL which stands for *Computer Assisted Language Learning* is related to the use of computers for language teaching and learning. CALL offers English language teachers and learners and will have more to offer in the future.. In present paper , the advantages and disadvantages inherent in the use of CALL are enumerated and elaborated .Secondly, the technical capabilities and tools necessary for the use of CALL will be presented.

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1 . Introduction

1.1 Why do we use CALL?

English teachers -and language teachers in general- should put many important factors into consideration before embarking on the adventure of CALL. First of all, they should evaluate the computer skills of learners. Learners with little or no knowledge of computers will first require a thorough introduction in basic computer skills including word processing, e-mail usage and the operation of browser software.

The second factor is related to the learners' language level and navigation on the web. If teachers want their students to work with ESL web sites, they will have to take into account that only intermediate or advanced level learners will ensure an effective navigation on the web, since most of the ESL web sites require high knowledge of the English language.

Thirdly, a few technical issues should be taken into account. It is obvious that availability of a computer room on a regular basis is the first thing that teachers need for CALL to be successful. The experience of many teachers has revealed that three students per computer is the maximum for the teaching experience to be effective. Besides, teachers should have at their disposal software especially designed for ESL. On the other hand, navigation on the web implies other specific requirements, such as,

- a) Access to a reliable network environment. The most important thing is to count on a reliable internet provider.
- b) Use of modern equipment and browser software. The use of outdated equipment may result in unacceptable

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download times and thus failure of the experience. The fastest modems should be used (at least 28,800 bps) and, if possible, the best computers to work on the web would be Power PC or Power Macintosh as they possess the large amounts of memory required to operate the new generation of plug-in multimedia applications. Besides, teachers should note that many newer sites are designed to be used only with the latest versions of browser software, such as Netscapes Navigator and Communicator or Microsofts Internet Explorer.

c) Teachers should be familiar with basic internet technology in order to anticipate potential problems. Furthermore, they should be ready to contact support staff and on-line help resources in case major technical problems occur.

1.2. Some advantages and disadvantages of CALL

CALL offers modern English language teachers many facilities and novel techniques for teaching and learning . It is vital to develop and maintain a critical eye on it. One of the advantages of **CALL** is that, in Phillips words, it **offers a powerful self-access facility** ; that is, it helps to generate autonomous learners who will experience freedom of choice. The tools that learners find in computers allow them to assume mastery of their own learning experience. Students can call up the programs held by computers whenever they want; besides, computers are sensitive to the learners level of proficiency. This advantage, though, can also be seen as a disadvantage, since many teachers may consider that computers are undertaking functions that should be performed by trained teachers. In this paper I will demonstrate that this disadvantage is not a real one, since, in fact, computers should be used by teachers as a complementary tool in the teaching process.

Another advantage of **CALL** is that it **gives a new role to teaching materials**. Out of the context of CALL, teaching materials are passive. As Phillips points out, before computers were used in the classroom context Nothing the student said or did could influence in any deep sense the linear progression of the content: In CALL, materials adapt themselves to the requirements of the individual student; that is, they become interactive. To this advantage, Phillips attaches a counter-argument: to what extent is it desirable that more of the management of learning be embodied in the materials themselves rather than in the way they are exploited?

The advantages and disadvantages mentioned up to the present moment make us aware of an important fact in relation to CALL- we have to be constantly analysing whether the uses to which CALL is put are just reinforcing current practices or if, in contrast, they are promoting curriculum renewal. In order to fully benefit from the potential of the computer for language learning, language teaching specialists have to promote a complementary relationship with computers. The technology that computers offer has to be integrated with pedagogic programs that guarantee a real evolution of the teaching methodologies and procedures.

Harrison offers a picture in which the teacher abandons his informative role to take on a more active part in the teaching process; and this is allowed to him thanks to computer co-operation, since the computer is now going to be the new source of information. This results in an innovative teaching methodology in which the dichotomy teacher/transmissor-student/receiver is broken. Now, teachers are going to promote communication/interaction with -and mainly among- students; in order to attain this objective, they are going to encourage students to take risks, leaving aside penalties for producing incorrect bits of language. Besides, the teachers analysis of the teaching-learning process and his planning of its development will make possible for him to correct possible errors in this process. Finally, the introduction of the unexpected will be determinant to give students enough motivation for them to take an active part in their learning process. With the practice of this kind of activities, curriculum renewal is guaranteed, so that there is no doubt that a real and evident progress in teaching methodologies is taking place.

One final aspect that we should analyse in relation to the implementation of computers in English language teaching is ultimately an ethical question- **What is the kind of environment that is going to be created by means of the computer?**. Personally, I consider that the creation of autonomous learners should not be associated to the concept of human alienation. The CALL classroom should not be conceived as a room in which every learner is studying in isolation in front of his/her computer. Teachers must think of activities that enable group work/human interaction and computers to be compatible. Otherwise, men as social beings will be replaced by men as alienated computer slaves.

1.3. What do we need to use CALL?

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embarking on the adventure of CALL. First of all, they should evaluate the computer skills of learners. Learners with little or no knowledge of computers will first require a thorough introduction in basic computer skills including word processing, e-mail usage and the operation of browser software.

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It would be an ideal situation if learners could fulfil all these requirements. We have to be realistic, though, and take into account that this will be the case just on very few occasions. In this case, the advice given by teachers who have worked with computers is the use of imagination in order to counterbalance the lack of technological availabilities. If software is not available, they should be ready to look for free software that can be found in the web; if working on-line is forbidden by the institution, they should take the most of the possibilities that working off-line offers. Even if there is no possibility to work with specialised software, the decision of giving the current teaching method a new format is a right one. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that the students' motivation and interest raise if they do a typical fill-in-the-gap exercise on the computer rather than if they do it on a piece of paper or a book. In this case, though, (that is, in case students use computers to do traditional exercises) students should be encouraged to discover by themselves (whenever possible) modern software especially designed for the study of languages.

2 . Conclusion

The enormous amount of specific software that has been created for learning English includes the possibility of teaching and training the skills of listening and speaking. The problem is that, rather than being truly interactive, the activities designed for improving listening and speaking are mainly based on drills. Thus, learners have the possibility of enacting dialogues -generally of the question-answer type- with characters belonging to the program, but these are indeed closed dialogues; that is, learners cannot ask or answer whatever they want, but they have to limit themselves to predetermined texts. Nevertheless, despite the lack of true/real interaction, this experience has been proved to be highly motivating, since many of the graphic environments that programs offer turn out to be quite realistic. Thus, if learners concentrate on the activity, they may feel -up to a certain extent- just as if they were really speaking to a hostess in the airport, or to a bobby in Market Square. Out of the above-mentioned interactive programs, there are many other programs that offer the possibility of listening to English, mainly with an American accent -in the case of the majority of games- or with a British accent. These programs include, among others, many encyclopaedias and the already mentioned games. Finally, as it will be commented in the following section, it is a must reminding teachers and learners the endless source of listening material that the web offers.

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